

Sir Edward Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37:
The Enhancement of Musical and Dramatic Performance through
the Orchestration of Romantic Song Literature

By

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ABSTRACT

Sir Edward Elgar's song cycle *Sea Pictures*, op. 37 premiered on 5 October 1899. Written for contralto and orchestra, it was a part of the orchestral song cycle genre of the Romantic era. This new type of composition created an opportunity for musical and dramatic exploration in the art song through its use of the different colors and timbres an orchestra contains as opposed to the more traditional, and more homogenous sounding, piano.

This paper is divided into six major parts: Elgar's biographical background, and his connection to the natural world; his general compositional style; his interest and participation in sound recording; a detailed analysis of *Sea Pictures*; and finally a comparison of orchestral versus pianistic song cycle performance. By significant study of the orchestration and instrumentation that Elgar uses, a performance with piano will be improved through knowledge of the colors and instruments that the composer employs at specific moments in the music to fulfill the Romantic ideal of painting a picture, thereby creating both a visual and aural world for the listener.

When examining the songs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a new genre begins to emerge: the orchestral song cycle. A song cycle may be defined as a group of songs that are designed for performance in printed order as a single entity and linked by common poet, theme, and/or character persona. The orchestral song cycle follows the same guidelines but is accompanied by a full orchestra rather than a piano. For its performers, the orchestrated song cycle gives new opportunities for dramatic and musical expression.

Sir Edward Elgar contributed to this new genre with his song cycle, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37. However, in addition to considering the orchestration, there are other areas of inquiry that should be approached prior to embarking on a performance of these five songs: the text must be assessed and key moments identified; the theoretical foundation should be explored; and finally, one should seek knowledge of the orchestration and instrumentation and how they inform the song and cycle as a whole. Through awareness of these aspects, a performer may present a much more nuanced performance.

BIOGRAPHY

Edward William Elgar was born on 2 June 1857 at Broadheath, a parish in the Malvern Hills district of Worcestershire, England. The second son of William Henry and Ann Greening Elgar, he was the fourth surviving child out of seven siblings. William was a musician who played and taught both the violin and piano and was also employed as organist of St. George Catholic Church in Worcester for over forty years. His main trade, however, was that of a piano tuner. He had been apprenticed at Coventry &

Hollier in London at a very young age and parlayed that craft into his own business later in his adult life. Ann, Edward's mother, was the youngest child of a farmer. Her distinct love of nature and literature had a strong and lasting influence on her son.

In 1856, the year prior to Edward's birth, Ann persuaded William to move out to the country, as it was a more appropriate place to raise their children; prior to this move, they were living in London in order to be near William's piano tuning employer. They found a small cottage in Broadheath, a country town slightly north of Worcester, surrounded by farms, woods and small streams with a view of the Malvern Hills. Prior to the birth of Edward, Ann had had three other children at their London residence. Although Ann and her children loved their new country residence, it proved to be a disastrous commute for William as the road into the small town would become impassible in inclement weather; he would be forced to stay in London for days at a time. In 1859, the family decided that the travel back and forth to the shop was no longer necessary and moved back to their apartment above the piano tuning business in London.

Edward showed great musical promise at a young age beginning with the piano. Indeed, William would take his son with him on visits to influential clients and have him display his musical skills. When he was twelve, Edward joined the Worcester Glee Club as a violinist and by 1873, "declared that he was a musician and no other career would satisfy him."¹ He desperately wanted to attend the Leipzig Conservatory that Felix Mendelssohn had founded, but his parents did not have the money to pay for tuition. So, Edward began to save his earnings from any work he did in order to pay for violin lessons in London. He also fashioned his own musical education within the confines of

¹ Lynnette Ellen Borman, *"Sea Pictures", Op. 37 by Sir Edward Elgar: A Comprehensive Guide for Study and Performance* (DMA Document, Ohio State University, 1998. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 1998), 6.

his hometown: reading textbooks, scores and experimenting with different instruments in his father's shop; serving as the assistant organist at St. George's as well as writing anthems for the choir; playing bassoon in a wind quintet with his brothers; conducting and arranging music for the Worcester Glee Club; and serving as a leader and instructor at the Worcester Instrumental Society. In 1881, he passed the Royal Academy of Music's examinations with honors.

Elgar's autodidactic streak was not applied solely to music, but to literature as well. His mother, Ann, instilled a great love of any and all books in her children, none more so than Edward. She would read and tell her children stories, allowing and encouraging them to escape into a world of their imagination; he would remain an avid reader for the rest of his life. The further one looks into Elgar's character and personality, however, the more one realizes that his love of literature was not simply for the initial pleasure it gave him. Rather, it seems to have been tied to his deep-seated belief of greatness within himself tempered by the knowledge that he was not born into a social class that often allowed its members to strive for significance in the world at large.

[Within him was] the need to make sense of his peculiar circumstances as a Catholic and a poor man with intimations of great things within him, which he felt might express themselves in literary form; his deep emotional frustrations in early manhood...could discover no outlet through his music until he was middle-aged...²

This feeling of social inadequacy would haunt the composer throughout his life, extending even into his marriage. Edward met Caroline Alice Roberts (1848-1920) in 1886 when she became one of his private piano students. Already a published writer whose works included a two-volume novel, a long poem and multiple smaller works,

² Raymond Monk, *Edward Elgar: Music and Literature* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1993), 191.

Alice was nine years his elder. As the daughter of a prominent major general of the British Army stationed in India, Alice and her family were members of a higher social class. Neither of the families approved of their relationship: Edward's parents could not understand his romantic attachment to a woman so many years older than himself and Alice's aunts were appalled at the prospect. Although he held in his heart a noble Romantic truism—that an artist was a visionary and man apart—he was constantly reminded that he was not a member of high social standing by the new society he kept thanks to Alice. After initially accepting an invitation to a luncheon in honor of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, he sent a card on the morning of the event reading: "You would not wish your board to be disgraced by the presence of a piano-tuner's son and his wife."³

Despite the occasional unhappiness that the social implications of his marriage brought him, Alice was a general force of good and artistic influence on Edward. She admired and lauded his creative talents and would gently urge him out of the depressions he would lapse into after completing a major work. She would occasionally be the source of inspiration for a particular work or theme; indeed, one of the songs in the *Sea Pictures* cycle is set to a poem of hers. So close was their attachment that after her death on 7 April 1920, it seems a piece of Elgar's creativity died as well, as no piece of great renown was written after that date.⁴

In 1933, Elgar was diagnosed with sciatica but in autumn of that same year, during an operation, it was found that the original diagnosis was incorrect and that the pain he was suffering from was due to a malignant brain tumor. He knew he was dying

³ Diana M. McVeagh, "Sir Edward Elgar." *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Stanley Sadie. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>> (Accessed 29 January 2014).

⁴ McVeagh, "Sir Edward Elgar." *Grove Music Online*.

and was concerned about his current work, the third symphony that would ultimately remain unfinished. He died on 23 February 1934 and was buried beside his wife in the place she had chosen, St. Wulstan's Church in Little Malvern. He is commemorated by a window based on his composition, *The Dream of Gerontius*, in Worcester Cathedral (1935) and a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey (1972).

NATURE

One of the major influences on Elgar's life and compositions stems from his love of nature. This attachment to the natural world was not merely a passing appreciation but a feeling nurtured deep within his whole self. Much like his love for literature, his mother cultivated this sentiment. After being forced to move the family back to London for practical reasons, Ann insisted on sending her children to the countryside during their summer holidays. When Edward was ten years old, he stayed with some former neighbors at Broadheath. He wrote his first composition based on his surroundings in that country setting, a piece entitled "A Tune from Broadheath."⁵

Throughout his lifetime and extending to the present day, Elgar scholars and critics alike have sought to understand his profound connection with nature and how deeply it may or may not have influenced his compositions. The composer himself was a walking contradiction, one moment making statements like, "If ever after I'm dead you hear a little tune amongst the bracken on these Hills, don't be frightened as it will only be me humming the opening bars of my *Cello Concerto*,"⁶ while at the same time insisting

⁵ Borman, 9.

⁶ Borman, 10.

that his work not be aligned with the younger generation of English “Pastoral” composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). Elgar truly was not analogous with the pastoral generation, for in their music one could easily see the melodic contours of folk song, or the imitation of a bird’s song with a violin; with Elgar’s music, one must look and listen specifically for these moments, as they will not immediately conjure images of rolling meadow grasses or a nightingale’s evening tune.⁷

This lack of programmatic musical references is because Elgar was not so much a composer who wrote about a specific place but was more inspired by it. He composed themes while sitting beside a stream or looking out at the vista atop the Malvern Hills. Performers of Elgar’s music have gained a higher understanding of his compositions after acquainting themselves with “...the fact that he longed to be back in the Malvern Hills even though he knew he needed a London base.”⁸ Mark Elder recalls that, “Not long ago I walked on those hills and...felt I was at last beginning to understand something of the atmosphere that meant so much to him.”⁹ Elgar summarized his love of nature and the inspiration it gave him succinctly: “My idea is that there is music in the air, music all around us,’ he told an interviewer in 1896, ‘and—you—simply—simply take as much as you require!’”¹⁰

⁷ Matthew Riley, “Rustling Reeds and Lofty Pines: Elgar and the Music of Nature.” (*19th-Century Music*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Fall 2002)), 155.

⁸ Mark Elder in Conversation with Richard Morrison, “Conducting Elgar,” in *Elgar: An Anniversary Portrait*, edited by Nicholas Kenyon (London, England: Continuum, 2007), 133.

⁹ Kenyon, 133.

¹⁰ Riley, 155-56.

ELGAR'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Elgar's compositional style may not have consciously shown thematic material related to nature, but his inspiration for pursuing composing as a career certainly grew directly from it. He once mused, "I am still at heart the dreamy child who used to be found in the reeds by Severn side with a sheet of paper trying to fix the sounds and longing for something great. I am still looking for this."¹¹ Friends and acquaintances recall Elgar humming tunes and jotting ideas down on scrap pieces of paper while doing a myriad of daily tasks and having the ability to "express almost any thought that came into his head in terms of music."¹² Elgar personally summed up his views on composition:

I can only write when the spirit moves me. I cannot write to order...I take no credit for the inspiration that people may discover in my music, I cannot tell you how it comes to me. Of course, I could write out a piece of music here and now as you would write a letter, mechanically that is to say. But before the real stuff will come I must be quiet and apart.¹³

Within his output, Elgar's song literature is not as revered as his larger orchestral works such as his *Variations on an Original Theme for Orchestra* (commonly known as the "*Enigma Variations*"), op. 36 or his sweeping oratorio, *The Dreams of Gerontius*, op. 38. Due to where *Sea Pictures* falls in Elgar's compositional timeline—directly between these two major works—the song cycle is often overlooked and not considered to be on the same level of importance as its surrounding opuses.

¹¹ Christopher Kent, "Magic by mosaic: some aspects of Elgar's compositional methods," in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, edited by Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 33.

¹² Kent, 32.

¹³ Kent, 35.

It is often said of Elgar's songs that they are not the most important part of his repertoire and, set against the symphonies and other major works... maybe that is true. But so often with composers the songs are little laboratories in which ideas can be tested out: the song is after all the perfect opportunity to write a miniature...that they exhibit countless foretastes of the larger works with which Elgar is more often associated and that many of them are little masterpieces in their own right.¹⁴

When looking specifically at a set like *Sea Pictures*, we hear many examples of these “little masterpieces” in both sweeping, epic numbers—like “The Swimmer”—as well as smaller, more intimate songs, like “In Haven (Capri)”.

ELGAR AND RECORDING

During Elgar's compositional career, a new technology began to emerge that would change the face of the music industry forever: the ability to record sound. Elgar had always been interested in scientific endeavors and was especially fascinated by the early techniques at gramophone recording. Indeed, he was the first composer to participate in recording a great deal of his own music and among the first to realize just how much of an aid this new technology could be to the study of music and its performance. About the emerging tool, he said:

The luckier student of today can hear the finest orchestra perform the work of his choice as often as he pleases. Complicated passages, a single bar if desired, can be repeated until the innermost secrets of a score are analysed... The use of the instrument for faithful demonstrations at lectures on any branch of musical study seems illimitable.¹⁵

¹⁴ Claire-Louis Lucas & Jonathan Darnborough, “Dreamers of Dreams: The Songs of Elgar and Vaughan Williams,” in *A Special Flame: the Music of Elgar and Vaughan Williams, based on the proceedings of an international symposium jointly organised by the Elgar and RVW societies held at the British Library, Euston Road, London, Saturday 29 & Sunday 30 March 2003*, edited by John Norris and Andrew Neill (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 2004), 23.

¹⁵ Borman, 14.

Elgar first entered a recording studio in January of 1914; he was fifty-six years old. The recordings that Elgar made, numbering more than fifty in total, leave a remarkable body of work that instructs its listeners as to the performance practices of the day and Elgar's own, personal interpretation of his music. Modern audiences would learn that the use of *portamento* was much more common than it is today and conversely, the use of vibrato was much less pronounced, especially within the stringed instruments. Tempos are generally less steady than we expect and faster movements are much quicker than the metronome marking would indicate. There is an air of less attention to detail, particularly in the area of rhythm, and the ensemble is less meticulously balanced and clean than it is today. Elgar conducted with his baton using a singularly personal rubato, employing *tenuti*, *accelerandi*, *ritenuti*, and agogic accents. He believed that "performances which were square or wooden were caricatures of his thought; his music, he said, should be played 'elastically and mystically' and he recognized the authentic accents of his expression when it 'throbbed and seethed' as he intended that it should."¹⁶

From his first recording in 1914 through the next twenty years, Elgar was intimately involved in each step of the recorded performances. There is an existing recording of *Sea Pictures* with Elgar conducting, dating from 11 October 1922, sung by Leila Megàne. In January of 1934, he supervised his last recording from his bedroom at home, giving explicit directions for the recording of *Caractacus*.¹⁷ Thanks to his tireless work, there remains a catalog unparalleled in its documentary significance of early composer-conductor recordings.¹⁸

¹⁶ Timothy Day, "Elgar and recording," in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, edited by Daniel Grimley and Julian Rushton, 189-90.

¹⁷ Borman, 15.

¹⁸ McVeagh, "Sir Edward Elgar." *Grove Music Online*.

SEA PICTURES

Sir Edward Elgar's song cycle, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37, premiered on 5 October 1899 at St. Andrew's Hall at the Norwich Festival in Norwich, Norfolk. In October of 1898, the Norwich Festival asked the composer for a short choral work to be sung at the next year's festival, but Elgar became engrossed in the *Enigma Variations* and the piece was set aside. In January of 1899, the Festival suggested a *scena* for a soloist. The company had already contracted the contralto, Clara Butt, for the coming year, so she was suggested as the singer. Having heard Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* many years before and having just completed a piece in which one theme provided him with fourteen separate variations, Elgar suggested that he write a collection of songs bound together by one subject.¹⁹

The work is scored for a conventionally-sized orchestra for the time, made up of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, three timpani, bass drum, gong, harp, organ (optional), and strings. The third and fifth songs, "Sabbath Morning at Sea" and "The Swimmer," are grandiose and the largest in scale while the second and fourth, "In Haven (Capri)" and "Where Corals Lie," function as smaller endeavors, almost in miniature.

With *Sea Pictures*, Elgar created an experience rarely found in the orchestral song cycle: a piano part that is not a simple reduction of the full score.

¹⁹ Diana M. McVeagh, *Elgar the Music Maker* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 54-55.

[It is surprising] to see how little the piano parts resembled the orchestral reductions that are such a nightmare to most pianists, where every note of the orchestral texture seems to have been dumped on the piano staves. On the contrary these [the piano scores of the songs] looked like real piano parts.²⁰

Elgar performed these songs personally multiple times, and so it can be inferred that he believed the piano score to be a valid work in its own right.

The poetry of the cycle, taken from the work of five separate writers, has been much criticized as subpar and unimaginative, particularly that of the fifth song.²¹ The choice that Elgar made in his poems, however, seems to have been a deliberate one, as he was known to have believed that, "...it is better to set the best second-rate poetry to music, for the most immortal verse *is* music already."²² Hence, by choosing poems that were not great art in and of themselves allowed Elgar to create the kind of music and art that *he* wished, not to be dictated by the beauty of the verse before him.

Elgar was wonderful at setting text and often does much of the work for his singers, accenting appropriate syllables either with range placement—unimportant syllables on lower notes, etc. —or with written symbols, giving his singers continuous clues as to how he wanted the pieces performed. And while each poem in this set may not reach the level of a Shakespearian sonnet on its own, when in combination with Elgar's score, the words fly off the page. The composer employs the text for both direct inspiration as well as general text painting. Direct inspiration is seen in "Sabbath Morning at Sea," with the text "He shall assist me to look higher" sung twice, with the repeat set a third higher. In the same song, the word "downward" is set with the second syllable a fifth below the first, demonstrating text painting. He also lets the dramatic

²⁰ Lucas and Darnborough, 24.

²¹ Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 290-291.

²² Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1984), 280.

pacing of the poem dictate the rhythm of the piece, as in “Where Corals Lie” when the text, “Yes, press my eyelids close, tis well” is sung. Here, he marks a *ritardando* as well as a *colla parte*, allowing the singer the rhythmic freedom to give appropriate weight to the words that bring a new level of insistence to the main goal of the poem; while the person’s love may close her eyes, she can still see the vivid picture of the coral reefs she longs to visit and nothing he may do will keep her from them. Perhaps the song that best displays Elgar’s ability at setting a text is the one whose poem has been so harshly critiqued for its own beauty: “The Swimmer” takes its narrator on a journey from a turbulent sea and a wearying attempt to find a shore to rest upon and, while painting a vivid picture of a boisterous thunderstorm, eventually leads its swimmer to the eternal place of peace “where no light wearies and no love wanes.”

Elgar begins his cycle with a lullaby, “Sea Slumber-Song,” similar to Schubert’s ‘Gute Nacht’ that opens *Die Winterreise*.²³ It is set to a poem by Roden B. W. Noel (1834-1909), which Elgar set in its entirety, repeating only one or two lines. The poem is as follows:

Sea-birds are asleep,
The world forgets to weep,
Sea murmurs her soft slumber-song
On the shadowy sand
Of this elfin land;
“I the Mother mild,
Hush thee, O my child,
Forget the voices wild!
Isles in elfin light
Dream, the rocks and caves,
Lulled by whispering waves,
Veil their marbles bright,
Foam glimmers faintly white
Upon the shelly sand
Of this elfin land;

²³ Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 278.

Sea-sound like violins,
To slumber woos and wins,
I murmur my soft slumber-song,
Leave woes, and wails, and sins,
Ocean's shadowy might
Breathes good-night,
Good-night!"²⁴

Elgar sets the verse fairly consistently with the phrasing intended by Noel, with only a couple of instances where a separation in the text does not elide with the natural place for the singer to breathe; the most notable of these is in bar 20 with the text, "Isles in elfin light Dream, the rocks and caves," requiring the singer to carry through the internal cadence and breathe after the word "dream" in order to lend clarity to the text (see Musical Example 2). Noel uses a complicated and inconsistent rhyme scheme, varying the length and relationship between verses:

AABCCDDDEFFEECCGGBGEE(E)

The music of "Sea Slumber-Song" unfolds in an arpeggiated figure from a chord in A minor, the subdominant of the E minor tonic; this creates a feeling of starting in the middle of a thought or moment, appropriately creating a world centered around the ceaselessly undulating ocean. The strings imitate the rolling and crashing of a wave with the trebles rising against the falling bass line and vice versa (see Musical Example 1).

²⁴ Edward Elgar, *Sea Pictures, op. 37: Song cycle for contralto and piano* (London, England: Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd, 1998), ii.

Musical Example 1: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sea Slumber-Song," mm. 1-2²⁵

The character of this song, the “mother,” subtly creeps out of this texture with our A theme, matching the *pianissimo* marked in the accompaniment. In the B section of the song beginning in bar 12, we modulate to E Major, indicating that this is not a plaintive lullaby, but one of love and comforting, demonstrating the text, “I, the mother mild...” (see Musical Example 2).

Musical Example 2: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sea Slumber-Song," mm. 11-13

²⁵ All musical examples are taken from an edition of *Sea Pictures* published in 1899, PDF found on International Music Score Library Project: Edward Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37: Song cycle for contralto and piano (London, England: Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd, 1899) <<http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/8/8a/IMSLP167223-SIBLEY1802.17481.47aa-39087012083244score.pdf>> (Accessed 29 January 2014).

At bar 18, we get a short restatement of the opening bars, only to be interrupted two measures later with a new idea, C. It is the most lyrical idea we have heard yet and also the most rhythmically playful, with the melody incorporating dotted sixteenth notes and quick passing tones on the words “caves” and “lulled,” illustrating the gently flowing water of the “whisp’ring waves” (see Musical Example 3).



Musical Example 3: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sea Slumber-Song" mm. 18-21

At measure 29 we hear A', differing only in rhythm to suit the new text, which leads us into an exact restatement of B at bar 38 (also with new text). However, this time we hear no playful melody of C as the lullaby is drawing to a close, hoping to achieve its goal (see Musical Example 4). The coda begins in measure 43 and modulates, using the text “Goodnight,” from E major to an E-flat major-minor seventh chord and onto a G dominant-seventh chord resolving to a C major chord that modulates within the last three bars back to the original tonic of E minor (see Musical Example 4).

Kiss my lips, and softly say:
“Joy, sea-swept, may fade to-day;
Love alone will stay.”²⁶

The poem and early song were written as a reminiscence of a holiday that Alice had taken in the Italian island of Capri prior to meeting Edward. The verse is set strophically to match the triplet AAA BBB CCC rhyme scheme and similar verbal rhythms that Alice used in each stanza. She makes liberal use of alliteration and consonance, linking the separate thoughts of the poem: Most notably “L” as in “Closely let me hold,” “Love alone will,” and “Closely cling” (extra alliteration here with the “kl” sound of “Closely” and “cling”) and “S” as in “Storms are sweeping sea,” “waves beat fast, foam-flakes,” the ending “-st” in the second stanza, and “Kiss my lips, and softly say,” and “sea-swept.”

This is the cycle's simplest musical setting, with the vocal line spanning only an octave; later in the cycle the vocal line is expanded as far as two full octaves in “The Swimmer.” Musically, the song is as delicate as one can imagine sitting on the shore of a beach might be. Gentle waves inhabit the world of this song, demonstrated by muted pizzicato strings and Elgar’s choice of C major.

Allegretto. (♩ = 72)

PIANO. Pizzicato strings

Close - ly let me hold thy hand . . .

pp

Musical Example 5: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "In Haven (Capri)," mm. 1-4

²⁶ Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37: Song cycle for contralto and piano, ii.

It is orchestrated for a chamber ensemble, with only one wind player on each part, a single horn, harp and strings. The third strophe, beginning in bar 23, lends a little more support to the singer for her plea, “Kiss my lips,” with the first violins dividing and the song ends as subtly as it began, with a quick scale in the violins and a pizzicato note in the cello/bass line on the second beat of the final measure.



Musical Example 6: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "In Haven (Capri)," mm. 31-33

“Sabbath Morning at Sea” is the cycle’s third song and marks the first of the more substantial numbers; there is an optional organ line, expanding the orchestration and giving the piece a decidedly more religious tone.²⁷ Set to a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), Elgar has again set the entirety of the original text:

The ship went on with solemn face:
 To meet the darkness on the deep,
 The solemn ship went onward.
 I bowed down weary in the place;
 For parting tears and present sleep
 Had weighed mine eyelids downward.

The new sight, the new wondrous sight!
 The waters around me, turbulent,
 The skies, impassive o’er me,
 Calm in a moonless, sunless light,
 As glorified by even the intent
 Of holding the day glory!

²⁷ Norman del Mar, *Conducting Elgar* (New York, NY: Clarendon Press, 1998), 201.

Love me, sweet friends, this sabbath day.
The sea sings round me while ye roll
Afar the hymn, unaltered,
And kneel, where once I knelt to pray,
And bless me deeper in your soul
Because your voice has faltered.

And though this sabbath comes to me
Without the stolèd minister,
And the chanting congregation,
God's spirit shall give comfort. HE
Who brooded soft on waters drear,
Creator on creation,

He shall assist me to look higher,
Where keep the saints, with harp and song,
An endless sabbath morning,
And, on that sea commixed with fire,
Oft drop their eyelids raised too long
To the full Godhead's burning.²⁸

In this poem, a narrator describes her voyage, taking her away from her congregation left behind at home. Although it begins with a sense of trepidation and even anguish, by the end of the verse, she has seen a glorious sunrise on the morning of the Sabbath, with the sun's rays glinting atop the ocean so fiercely that even the saints can no longer behold it, "Oft drop their eyelids raised too long to the full Godhead's burning." The rhyme scheme of the poetry faithfully follows a regular ABCABC... pattern.

The song opens with a rising arpeggio, reminiscent of "Sea Slumber-Song," although treated quite differently. We begin in C major with the narrator and A theme in a quasi-recitative style, describing her coming journey. In measure 10 we hear the first statement of the B theme accompanied by a pulsating string section.

²⁸ Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37: *Song cycle for contralto and piano*, ii-iii.



Musical Example 7: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 11-13

The arpeggio of the opening bars, in a new faster tempo, leads us into the C theme at bar 19. Painting the text of turbulent waters, the triplet motion in the winds becomes insistent, varying with a rolling neighbor note sequence in the strings.

Musical Example 8: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 17-21

This theme recedes into B' taking us to the word "glory," which begins a march-like orchestral four-bar interlude, using the full wind and brass sections, which modulates to the new key of B major at measure 36 (see Musical Example 9).



Musical Example 9: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 33-35

In this new tonic, Elgar presents a fourth theme, D. There is a brief duet between singer and violin, with the string player echoing the voice's melody in measure 37; this is repeated at measure 45.

Musical Example 10: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 36-37

The forward progression of the theme comes to a short pause on the words, "And kneel, where once I knelt to pray," before returning to the initial melody of the theme in measure 44. After a cadence on the submediant, the key modulates to D-flat major but returns to the opening theme, A' (see Musical Example 11).



Musical Example 11: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 48-49

In bar 55 we hear the third and final statement of B'', ending with a deceptive pivot chord modulation back to the original key of C Major. The trumpet takes a prominent role in restating the arpeggio from the opening bars one final time and the organ enters for the first time at measure 61 (see Musical Example 12). The singer introduces yet another new theme, E, and Elgar includes a direct answer to the text, "He shall assist me to look higher," beginning the phrase on a C for the first statement and moving up a third to E for the repetition at bar 66 (see Musical Example 12).

The image displays three systems of musical notation from Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," measures 61-67. The first system features a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "a - tor on ere - a - tion." and is marked *a tempo*. The piano accompaniment starts with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic and includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. A red label "trumpet" is placed above the piano staff in the second measure. The second system is marked *Grandioso (♩ = 90)* and *f* (forte). It features a vocal line with the lyrics "He shall as_sist me to look higher," and a piano accompaniment with a *sp* (sforzando) dynamic and a *con Ped. sempre* (continuous pedal) instruction. The third system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "He shall as_sist me to look higher, Where keep the" and the piano accompaniment, which maintains the *sp* dynamic.

Musical Example 12: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 61-67

The orchestra cycles through a sequence of their music originally heard within the D theme at bar 46. Beginning at measure 70, the three chords followed by one beat of rising triplets passes among the sections, first in the winds and then to the low strings (see Musical Example 13).

cantabile ed accelerando.

end - less sab - bath morn - ing, An

sostenuto ed accelerando

Flutes/Clarinet

Bassoon/Cello/Bass

Musical Example 13: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 70-73

This leads us into the last new theme of the piece, F, at bar 75. The text “And on that sea commixed with fire” is accompanied by the most varied rhythmic motion yet heard with half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, triplets and sixteenth notes comingling at once; we can hear fire dancing on the surface of the sea.

And, on . . . that sea com -

cresc.

mix'd . . . with fire, On . . . that sea com -

Musical Example 14: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 74-77

There is a brief restatement of D' at measure 79 before the vocal climax in bar 83. Once the singer completes her phrase, the orchestra builds to the *forte* in measure 85.

However, much as a wave wells up only to crash and recede onshore, the orchestra reaches its climax and decrescendos quickly to *pianissimo* in bar 87, before immediately building back up with a bar of *tremolo* to the final *fortissimo*.



Musical Example 15: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Sabbath Morning at Sea," mm. 86-89

The fourth song is the second miniature in the cycle. "Where Corals Lie" is set to a poem by Richard Garnett (1855-1906).

The deeps have music soft and low
 When wind awake the airy spry,
 It lures me, lures me on to go
 And see the land where corals lie.

By mount and mead, by lawn and rill,
 When night is deep, and moon is high,
 That music seeks and finds me still,
 And tells me where the corals lie.

Yes, press my eyelids close, 'tis well;
 But far the rapid fancies fly
 To rolling worlds of wave and shell,
 And all the lands where corals lie.

Thy lips are like a sunset glow,
Thy smile is like a morning sky,
Yet leave me, leave me, let me go
And see the land where corals lie.²⁹

Garnett chooses to use a *kyrielle* rhyme scheme of ABAB CBCB DBDB ABAB, always returning to the assonance of the final vowel sound in “lie,” giving a very particular feeling of constantly finding a home. This poem “makes a subtle antithesis to Alice Elgar’s poem: love must now give place to the exotic charms and colours of nature at the bottom of the sea.”³⁰

Elgar treats the orchestra as a chamber ensemble in this song, similar to that of “In Haven,” although the forces are slightly expanded with the full woodwind section being used. The piece opens in D major with a rolling melody in the strings and bassoon, doubled at the octave. By measure 3 we are in the tonic of B minor with the strings and winds playing open fifths, lending a feeling of exoticism.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Where Corals Lie" from Elgar's *Sea Pictures*. The score is for voice and piano. The tempo is marked "Allegretto, ma non troppo. (♩ = 56)". The key signature is D major (two sharps). The time signature is 4/4. The voice part is written in a single staff. The piano part is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The piano part features a rolling melody in the strings and bassoon, doubled at the octave. The piano part is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking. The piano part also includes a *pp* (pianissimo) marking and a *con Ped.* (con pedal) marking. The lyrics "The deeps have music soft and" are written below the piano part.

Musical Example 16: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Where Corals Lie," mm. 1-5

²⁹ Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37: Song cycle for contralto and piano, iii.

³⁰ Robert Anderson, *Elgar*, 290.

The feeling of B minor is fairly persistent save in the third and fourth lines of stanzas one, two, and four (the third is set to different music), which stretches B minor out to its relative D major, ends on a half cadence and modulates back to B minor on the repeat of the fourth line, as in measures 10 through 15.



Musical Example 17: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Where Corals Lie," mm. 13-15

At bar 29, the third stanza begins with a completely new musical treatment of the text, "Yes, press my eyelids close, 'tis well." The tempo slows down and is marked *colla parte*, with the singer dictating the rhythm and weight of the words. Elgar uses an accented suspension on "eyelids" in both measures 29 and 31, creating a more insistent plea.

Musical Example 18: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Where Corals Lie," mm. 29-32

In bar 32, we return to *a tempo* and immediately have a *stringendo*, taking us from another brief stint in D major back to B minor. The fourth verse follows the same pattern as the first and second; however, the postlude changes and (see Musical Example 19) with a "...final turn to D major, [followed by] the B major cadence, suggest[s] fulfillment."³¹



Musical Example 19: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "Where Corals Lie," mm. 47-51

The fifth and final song is the most epic, in terms of both orchestration and vocal range. "The cycle would find its close in a poem by Adam Lindsey Gordon [1833-1870]... [who] had committed the clearest, most willful suicide. His poem, 'The Swimmer,' matched single human strength against a challenge of nature hurled through overwhelming desolation..."³²

³¹ McVeagh, *Elgar the Music Maker*, 55.

³² Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 279.

With short, sharp, violent lights made vivid,
To southward far as the sight can roam,
Only the swirl of the surges livid,
The seas that climb and the surfs that comb.
Only the crag and the cliff to nor-ward,
And the rocks receding, and reefs flung forward,
Waifs wreck'd seaward, and wasted shoreward,
On shallows sheeted with flaming foam.

A grim, grey coast and a seaboard ghastly,
And shores trod seldom by feet of men –
Where the batter'd hull and the broken mast lie,
They have lain embedded these long years ten.
Love! when we wandered here together,
Hand in hand through the sparkling weather,
From the heights and hollows of fern and heather,
God surely loved us a little then.

The skies were fairer and shores were firmer –
The blue sea over the bright sand roll'd;
Babble and prattle, and ripple and murmur,
Sheen of silver and glamour of gold.

So, girt with tempest and wing'd with thunder
And clad with lightning and shod with sleet,
And strong winds treading the swift waves sunder
The flying rollers with frothy feet.
One gleam like a bloodshot sword-blade swims on
The sky-line, staining the green gulf crimson,
A death-stroke fiercely dealt by a dim sun
That strikes through his stormy winding sheet.

O, brave white horses! you gather and gallop,
The storm sprite loosens the gusty reins;
Now the stoutest ship were the frailest shallop
In your hollow backs, on your high-arched manes.
I would ride as never a man has ridden
In your sleepy, swirling surges hidden;
To gulfs foreshadow'd through straits forbidden,
Where no light wearies and no love wanes.³³

³³ Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, op. 37: *Song cycle for contralto and piano*, iv.

Gordon uses an example of the Swinburne Octain with his rhyme scheme of ABABCCCB, which is repeated in each verse save for the half-verse beginning with “The skies were fairer...” The technical composition of the poem is the least sophisticated and subtle of the cycle, with clumsy rhymes such as “crimson” and “dim sun.” However, the over arching story that is told is powerful and poignant, especially considering the sad, self-inflicted fate of its author. The swimmer struggles through rough seas where many a ship has been wrecked. As she swims, she tries to remember happier days but her exhaustion throws her back into reality where she must attempt to stay afloat so she may find refuge on land, although what kind of land is unclear as she wishes to find a place where “no light wearies and no love wanes.” It presents the listener with a question of whether or not the swimmer is looking for a mortal or immortal place of rest.³⁴

In “The Swimmer,” Elgar creates a brash and volatile opening statement through the lengthiest and most explosive introduction. With a roll in the timpani and an immediate swell to *forte*, the orchestra descends on an A scale comprised of an unusual succession of chromatic harmonies, taking the orchestra into the depths of its range while highlighting the tuba; this scalar passage recalls the opening bars of “Sea Slumber-Song” (see Musical Example 20).

³⁴ McVeagh, *Elgar the Music Maker*, 55-6.

VOICE.

PIANO.

p

f

f

p

molto cresc.

dolce

p legato

cresc.

A Theme

Musical Example 20: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "The Swimmer," mm. 1-7

Thematically, this is Elgar's most complicated song in the cycle. The first melody we hear is introduced not through the singer but in the orchestra, with the A theme beginning in measure 6 played by the string section (see Musical Example 20). The song then continues in a through-composed form with a distinct set of themes: B at bar 10; C at 19; D at 31; E at 40; F at 58, which takes us into C and G major; and G at 66 ending with the text "Sheen of silver and glamour of gold" in what appears to be a half cadence in C

major. The song unexpectedly turns to the descending scalar passage from the opening bars, prior to returning to the recitative-like B' after bar 77.



Musical Example 21: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "The Swimmer," mm. 75-77

Elgar leads his audience to believe that there is to be a full recapitulation to the original theme order, but that is not what occurs because from the end of B', he launches directly into D' in measure 87. After this restatement, the singer finally sings the A theme for the first time in bar 97; the sudden emergence of so triumphant and diatonic a theme adds a spectacular amount of drama and a new surge of energy as she sings, "O brave white horses! you gather and gallop..." (see Musical Example 22).

Musical Example 22: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "The Swimmer," mm. 94-98

At measure 106, we return to C', heard again in its entirety, before launching into the last statement of the A'' theme for the vocalist in bar 118, closing the song with a final dramatic moment for the singer in which she sings the highest note of the song cycle, an A above the staff, and ends on a tonic D. The orchestra bookends the cycle with a short coda and we hear the A theme for the fourth and final time, this time in *accelerando*, and ending in an appropriately Romantic passage of accented, chordal movement and a long, tremolo fermata closing on a final *sforzando* chord in D Major.

The musical score is for measures 126-134 of "The Swimmer" from Elgar's *Sea Pictures*. It is written for voice and piano. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into four systems. The first system shows the vocal line with a fermata and the piano accompaniment with a *dim.* marking. The second system features a *dim.* marking and a *sf* marking. The third system includes an *accel.* marking and a *sf* marking. The fourth system concludes with a *sf* marking and a *FINE.* marking. The vocal line has a final note 'A' above the staff. The piano accompaniment includes a *sf* marking and a *dim.* marking.

Musical Example 23: Elgar, *Sea Pictures*, "The Swimmer," mm. 126-134

ORCHESTRAL VS. PIANO

Sea Pictures is a fascinating example of the orchestrated song cycle, as it was not premiered with an orchestra. Rather, Clara Butt, wearing what has been described as a dress displaying “...the scales of a mermaid’s sinuous form,”³⁵ and Sir Edward Elgar presented four of the five songs at a festival with only her contralto voice and the piano, which Elgar played. Therefore, this was not a set that was sketched at a piano with the sole intent of a much more grandiose reality as a full orchestral score. Rather, this piece was conceived on the piano for the piano and orchestrated after that version was sure to be successful. This was a common technique in the nineteenth century:

The whole issue of what constitutes orchestrally conceived music or pianistically conceived music is quite a complex one; particularly in the 19th century, when many composers composed at the piano – it was the tool of their thoughts. That did not mean to say that as they produced ideas at the piano they were not imagining them on the oboe, the violins, whatever it happened to be. They could indeed be writing at the piano, but with a very strong—one imagines, in Elgar’s case, an absolutely precise—image of the orchestral sounds. Nevertheless, the music is initially conceived with the aid of the piano and the orchestration process is a separate stage that comes afterwards. This may help to explain why the piano writing here is so effective.³⁶

The difference between orchestral and piano music is not as simple as the presence of more and varied instruments versus one. It is an all-encompassing difference, affecting the physical, aural, intellectual, and musical experience for both the performer and the audience.

The easiest and most immediate comparison between performing a set of songs with an orchestra versus performing them with a piano is that of the difference of size. With a score calling for 18 wind players, percussionists, and approximately 50 string

³⁵ Anderson, *Elgar*, 43.

³⁶ Lucas and Darnborough, 24-25.

players, the orchestra needed for *Sea Pictures* is not a diminutive chamber ensemble. For an audience member, walking into an auditorium and seeing over seventy people on stage would immediately lend a feeling of drama and weight. And audiences as well as performers have another physical reaction to the instruments contained in an orchestra with the players of low-pitched instruments producing notes that vibrate their bodies and the higher ranges producing piercing overtones.

For a performer, the physical presence of not only a full orchestra but a conductor as well, completely changes the nature of what they have to do as an artist. A charismatic presence onstage will now be paramount as she is competing with a multitude of other people for focus; this does not mean her gestures will detract from the appropriate mood of the piece, but subtle emotions will be lost. No longer does she have an accompanist who is there to follow her every musical thought and nuance, but rather there is a conductor, who serves as a sort of middle-man between her and the orchestra, asking the players to give the singer as much freedom as possible but also instructing and leading the singer in moments where there is no such luxury.

The aural experience differs in more significant ways than even the physical. At the outset, the instant realization is that of the varieties of timbres that an orchestra has at its disposal that a piano simply does not. As a Romantic era piece involving orchestra, *Sea Pictures* calls upon instruments as low in the spectrum as double basses and tubas extending to the opposite end with flutes and oboes. There exists in between a myriad of aural colors as well as an expansive range of articulation choices: strings with their legato and pizzicato; wind instruments with double tonguing and slides; percussion using timpani and gong to pulsating or jarring effect; and a harp with its glissandos.

These colors are used to paint the sea and its innumerable moods. With “Sea Slumber-Song” we hear a wave crash and immediately recede as the ocean begins her lullaby and the different instruments take us from the deep water to islands in half-light and caves rising out of the water. It then demonstrates restraint with “In Haven (Capri),” as a chamber grouping of instruments inspire an image of a warm beach over which water gently cascades and ripples back to the sea. They can paint a picture of a sunrise so bright that it appears to be fire dancing on the water in “Sabbath Morning at Sea” by using a multitude of rhythms simultaneously accompanied by the violins moving in soaring arpeggiation against the low winds and strings moving in a downward motion. In “Where Corals Lie” the bassoon gives a new weight to the unison chamber group, taking us to a deeper part of the ocean than we have been in before, allowing us to imagine ourselves surrounded by multicolored corals and the animals that swim amongst them, with the sixteenth-note grace notes in the oboe and bassoon conjuring an image of a fish quickly flitting by the outstretched arms of a branching coral. They create crashing waves at the beginning of “The Swimmer,” using a tremolo in the lower instruments and having the higher instruments aggressively enter on a dominant chord, cascading down chromatically.

A piano, being a member of the percussion family, can explore neither the continuous legato of the strings nor the bright blasts of the brass. The dampening pedal helps with the legato and a skilled pianist can strike the keys in such a way to create a jarring effect, but a single piano cannot equal the scenes that the timbres of different instruments can paint.

For a singer, the experiences of singing with an orchestra versus a piano create huge contrasts. When a singer with an appropriately-sized voice sings repertoire with an orchestra, there is a feeling of buoyancy that cannot be attained elsewhere. The sound built from fifty or more instruments underneath a voice allows for greater freedoms of expression, breath, and range. Singing with one instrument requires restraint and finesse, an understanding of the delicate balance between the voice and piano and where one might cover the other. That is not to say that finesse and refinement does not come into a performance with an orchestra and conversely that freedom of dynamics and expression does not happen with a piano. But, the consistent feeling with an orchestra is one of a wall of sound happening all around oneself, allowing the voice to grow organically out of that resonance.

Skilled pianists are able to create a marvelous feeling of intimacy with their remarkable instrument. A song cycle performed by only a vocalist and her collaborator most likely would take place in a smaller hall than it would if the orchestrated version were being produced. The sound, therefore, would not be required to fill as large of an auditorium, cut over the same amount of bodies in a room, and create an ambience similar to that of an orchestra. Rather, the quiet moments in the cycle would sound more intimate. The songs that required a lighter hand would have a greater feeling of grace and agility, allowing both the singer and pianist to explore the quieter end of the dynamic spectrum. The relationship between an accompanist and singer should be very personal and giving. The interplay between the two artists is ceaseless, but organic; at some moments the singer seems to be leading the piano and at other times the pianist the singer. There can be a finer degree of detail within all aspects: the specificity of breaths

as well as the tempo, which often tends to be faster with piano than with orchestra, as the larger ensemble requires a longer delay due to sound reverberation; *rubato* can be stretched to the exact degree that the interpretation of the text dictates; and dynamic contrasts can be more subtle.

Through his cycle, *Sea Pictures*, Sir Edward Elgar produced a work replete with nuanced text setting, colorfully painted imagery, and soaring melodies. This work added to the genre of the orchestral song cycle, which took hold of the late Romantic era and allowed its performers to explore a more dramatic aspect of song literature. “Here, one feels, is the Elgar who numbers among his skills the power of effectively uniting diverse strands of material; here is the dramatic Elgar, and therefore the essential Elgar.”³⁷

³⁷ Arthur Jacobs, “Elgar’s Solo Songs.” *The Musical Times* Vol. 90, No. 1278 (August 1949), 268.

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